

A ray of hope in the murky situation

Why not build up on it?

TWO signs of maturity are readable into the recent spate of political developments: first, Jatiya Chhatra Dal (JCD)'s pull-back from their Shudha Bhaban siege programme on April 21 at the instructions of prime minister Khaleda Zia; secondly, opposition has not given a call for hartal on the back of latest incidents.

The first move by the ruling party has definitely headed off an imminent showdown with the opposition which had previously scheduled a siege around Hawa Bhaban for the same day. And the latter decision of the opposition not to instantaneously go for hartal in spite of the reckless arrests of their activists and other forms of police highhandedness centring around the Hawa Bhaban siege programme reflected a healthy use of alternative options for political protestation.

We should not overlook the maturity signals because these are laced with premonitions of a political catastrophe given rise to by the spurts of unmitigated political brinkmanship. Nor should we feel overwhelmed by the speed of events. On the contrary, the ruling party and the opposition must take a pause, and build up on those two maturing signs thereby helping to expand the cycle of positive attitudes from what are mere dots now.

But, at the same time, we cannot but feel distraught of the highhandedness shown by the government to crush the opposition dissent. Its indiscriminate picking up of youngsters from train, launch and bus stations, arrests of opposition activists and foiling of their demonstration programmes at the points of origin, have had two fall-outs. One, we think the government is sealing off all avenues for the opposition to assemble, hold rallies and put their points across to the people. Topping the government is an unsupportable agenda, but there should be no physical threat perception overkill on the part of the government where the opposition is left with no space to operate. We feel that the closing down of outlets for the opposition might lead them to go back on the hartal course which we dread so much. Need we repeat that The Daily Star is awedly opposed to hartal?

Secondly, we don't also understand the government's recourse to reckless arrests which is touching the nerves of ordinary citizens. Why should the government court adverse public opinion when it can help it?

The bottomline, therefore, is this: the faint silver-line around the cloud that the JCD's withdrawal from a bellicose programme on April 21 and opposition's eschewal of impulsive hartal represented must be developed into a cycle of positive engagement between the two sides.

Mindless arrests

Let these be stopped

THE indiscriminate and mindless arrests of thousands of people have raised some serious questions in the public mind regarding the motive of the government. Unsuspecting and innocent young men are being picked up by police from railway stations, bus stands and all such places. The extent of the shock and trauma that the victims' families are subjected to is not hard to guess, as the young men are disappearing without notice. The hardship of the arrested people knows no bounds since they do not know when the ordeal would come to an end, nor are they aware of the sin for which they are being punished. All this is done in the name of resisting the opposition's oust-the-government agenda.

Most of the picked up young men are from poor families. Their parents and relatives have thronged the police stations and courts in the last few days to get them released. This has spawned a degree of corruption, let alone causing unbearable hardship to the ordinary people.

There is a High Court ruling that the law enforcers should be judicious in the application of Section 54, meaning that they should much rather err on the side of caution. That amply reflects judicial concern over the use of Section 54. Then it has been ruled that the law enforcers should produce the arrestees before court within 24 hours and make sure that their parents and relatives have been informed of the arrest as soon as possible, but not later than within the same time period.

It has been reported that nearly 40 percent of the thousands of arrestees have been released. That highlights the arbitrary nature of the operation.

There is no doubt that such a crackdown amounts to a gross violation of human rights. It is an ill-advised counter offensive in the face of the opposition movement that can only bring bad name to the government. We are hoping the government will see fit to stop the mass arrest campaign.

Making of the new European quilt

KAZI ANWARUL MASUD

SOMEHOW the people of the Orient have an obscurantist view of events unfolding in Europe, the latest being the formal expansion of NATO and its impact on Russian security and thereby on global peace and development. The distant perception of the Orient of the continued existence of NATO and the furtherance of its physical boundary are not easily understood. Edward Said spoke not only of the physical proximity of the Orient with Europe resulting in its becoming Europe's greatest, richest and oldest colonies but Orient also being the source of European civilisations and languages, its cultural contestant helping Europe to define its contrasting image and personality. Said saw the relationship between the Occident and the Orient as one of power, of domination and of varying degrees of complex hegemony. Added to this almost incestuous relationship furthered by Western efforts to construct the "Global Village" despite the digital divide between the East and the West, Eastern refusal to be cognisant of the revolutionary developments in Europe may not serve its long term interests.

To some it is perceived as a civilisational clash between Western Christianity and Russian Orthodox Christianity, a continuance of the old ideological conflict while to many this ostrich like refusal to view the current developments as a reflection of their inability to influence the course of events caused by the greatest contraction of power and influence in modern history due to the demise of the Soviet Union coupled with the emergence of the unchallenged and unrivalled US imperialism since the decline and fall of the Roman empire. Thus after the fall of the Berlin Wall for over two decades the US enjoyed the "unipolar moment" as it bestrde the globe like a colossus unquestioned by any power in the world.

But the events of nine-eleven at the dawn of the new century broke the spell of invincibility when the US realised that the vanquishment of its traditional rival extant for over half a century did not guarantee its impregnability before the attack by non-state actor then hosted by one of the poorest third world countries. As Henry Kissinger put it "It is a war (war on terror) that has no front lines. It is a war that had no issues on September 10th. Until then the American public would have been astonished to hear that there were fundamental differences between the United States and Islam or that there was such a concept as a war of civilisations". Kissinger's assertions obviously contradict the prolific writings of historian Bernard Lewis whose thesis of the long fight between Islam and Christianity from the birth of the former earned him distinction in the West.

But then American insularity is also easily understood because of its recent birth as an independent nation freed from British colonialism albeit with the profound distinction from other freedom movements in that the American independence was not a result of fight by the natives against the coloniser but by the settlers against the oppressive rule by their own kind. In that sense American war of independence is separated from all other freedom movements which shook the post-Second World War global society.

It is interesting to note Americans' firm conviction that but for US involvement in the two great wars of the last century the entire free world and multitude of subalterns would have been enslaved by the axis powers and therefore American military and economic powers endow the US with indispensability for the maintenance of peace and stability in the world. Therefore the 'arrogance' displayed by the Lilliputians — the al-Qaida and the Taliban (albeit morally indefensible and mounted in the name of a hybrid and totally wrong interpretation of a great religion) was an intolerable affront to the uncrowned king of the modern world. So the doctrine of preemption to attack an adversary not based on imminent threat but on plausible threat of attack lacking moral clarity and causing irreparable damage to international law and transatlantic alliance became the bed rock of Bush administration's foreign and defence policy. The US began to see the transatlantic alliance through the prism of Robert Kagan which perceived that the "real division of labour consisted of the US making the dinner and Europeans doing the dishes".

Bob Woodward's forthcoming book on plan to attack Iraq narates the extreme secrecy maintained at the initial stage of planning to the extent that both the National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice and CIA Director George Tenet were kept out of the loop let alone taking into confidence Bush's closest ally Tony Blair. The reason for this extreme secrecy was because President Bush wanted to avoid "enormous international angst and domestic speculation" at a time when the US was

busy with the Afghan war. The Iraqi chapter of Bush administration's magnum opus of war on terror revealed so far reflects, in the words of Anton Freve of the Council of Foreign Relations (Arms Control Today Jan/Feb 2004) "recklessness in a war of choice against Iraq compounded by inadequate preparation for the aftermath; loss of focus on the main anti-terrorist war by diverting attention to Hussein's villainy; failure of intelligence; dismissive treatment of allies; and indifference to the rising tide of hostility to US policy throughout the world." Anton Freve's observation received added weight by the book of retired General Wesley Clark (Winning modern wars: Iraq, Terrorism and American Empire) which blames Bush administration for widening the war on terror and leading the US down a path of isolation and insecurity.

If the Iraq war has resulted in a deep civilisational chasm in the world polity then the formal induction of new members in the NATO has the potentiality of Russia regressing from western embrace. The inclusion of the new members though decided upon in the Prague NATO Summit in November 2002 yet their joining the alliance has jarred many a nerve in Russia. Russian parliament saw the eastward expansion of NATO as "a big historical mistake on the part of the western states (which) does not add any positive aspect to Russia-NATO relations".

Since Russia believes that defending the vital interests of the Alliance and strengthening European security are mutually exclusive, Bush administration's arrogant pursuit of 'hard power' in the shape of military and economic instruments along with abridgement of the UN influence could force the world to sail into uncharted water given the fact that President Putin's successor four years hence could be a 'restorationist' and Russia may not remain beholden to the West for its economic advancement.

Narrows political space for Russia (which) must seriously work for different military counter-measures". Alexander Kononov, President of the Russian Institute of Strategic Studies in a recent article wrote about the psychological shock felt by many Russians in finding not only states from the now defunct Warsaw Pact but also from the former Soviet Republics have become members of NATO.

In the west NATO is pushing Russia away from the Baltic coast. The Kaliningrad is encircled by NATO with access blocked by Poland and Lithuania. In the south Romania and Bulgaria along with Turkey have fenced off Russia on the Black Sea coast. Ukraine Parliament's decision to grant NATO troops the right of passage through Ukrainian territory leaves Russia wondering as to where the NATO units are going to move across Ukrainian territory. Given the fact that the sub-standard armies of most of the new members are unlikely to add to the quality of NATO's operability, Russia is forced to think that NATO's eastward expansion, counter productive in terms of military efficiency, is actually aimed at strengthening US political position in Europe.

Formally nothing stands in the way of deploying weapons and troops in the Baltic countries since they are not signatories to the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty. Russian request dismissed by the West on the ground of Russian failure to remove its bases from Georgia and Moldova. The US refuses to recognise the fact that Russian consent to stationing American aviation in Central Asian countries is to fight terrorism which does not warrant deployment of NATO infrastructure in Poland and Baltic countries. It would be prudent for the West to construct a new security system embracing Russia instead of waiting to see if Russian democracy is growing following Western model. Henry Kissinger is strongly opposed to bringing Russia into the fold of Western security arrangement on the ground that it will sow confusion in NATO, lead to bureaucratisation of the process, and to weakening of the prospect of eventual reconciliation with Russia.

The Western argument of NATO's expansion as provided in the Prague Summit Declaration (21.11.04) and the Chairman's statement following the informal meeting of NATO-Russia Council (2.04.04) should adequately reassure Russia of her security interests being guarded does not appear to be convincing as one of the reasons behind the creation of NATO was the perception of the Western leaders that UN security system was not adequate to protect and defend, as seen by John Foster Dulles, "our cherished freedom", religious faith, and western political and social system as counter attraction to communism. Fortunately for the world President Vladimir Putin (as opposed to muscle flexing President Bush) is likely to find a synthesis

between reactionary restorationists seeking to restore Russia as a global superpower to counterbalance the US and those supporting stability in order to build a truly democratic society and a strong economy (Russia has GDP \$300-\$400 billion dollars).

Western analysts believe that President Putin is likely to restrain 'restorationists' due to constraints put by over-arching mutual strategic agenda and by the cost of neo-globalism and massive rearmament that a restorationist policy would require. Besides, despite Iraq invasion, strongly condemned by President Putin, majority of the Russians have reasonably favourable view of the US. US House Foreign Relations Committee was recently informed by the US State department that Russia and the US have become strong allies in the war on terror and share the common agenda to stem the flow of nuclear proliferation. US is also optimistic about interaction in the NATO-Russia Council leading to joint military action at some point in the future. Additionally the US has reassured Russia that NATO poses no threat to Russia and does not want an expansion of cold war era garrisons further to the East. US also recognises Russia's legitimate interests in Eurasia and has no desire to compete with Russia in that area. US administration's future policy towards Russia

Will supermarkets in Bangladesh be super for small farmers?

A M M SHAWKAT ALI

INTERNATIONAL Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) last December looked at the above issue (IFPRI, Forum, December 2003). It noted that booming market for supermarkets has been Latin America. According to an expert, supermarkets in Latin America achieved a rate of diffusion in one decade that took five decades in the United States. It is said that East and Southeast Asia are about five years behind Latin America. In India, the growth of supermarkets is on the rise but the pace is slower than elsewhere. The slower pace is due to "a policy environment that does not permit foreign direct investment in retail chain."

Multinational vs national supermarket chains

It may be useful to make a distinction between multinational and national supermarket chains. In India, the chain is largely national for reasons already stated. Whether national or multinational, the chain provides an one-stop service to consumers. The people of the countries in the developing world have long been used to a typical shopping day at an outdoor market to buy fresh fish, meat, vegetables and fruits. Such markets in the urban areas also include shops for buying rice, cooking oil and other daily necessities such as spices. In the rural markets that is also more or less the case.

Bangladesh case

Bangladesh scenario has been changing fast at least in the urban areas since the 1990's. The rural areas remain more or less unchanged. It is dominated by what is known as Hats that are seen to operate once a week. However, in prosperous locations, in the district and Upazila centres, there are fixed market places.

The rural market centres provide the supply chain to the urban areas working through Beparis, Aratdars and Wholesalers. It is said that these intermediaries reap more benefit in terms of profit than the poor farmers who sell their products. This system has not changed at least in respect of food items such as rice, wheat, chilies, vegetables and fruits.

However, a distinctive change has taken place in respect of poultry birds. The broilers and layers are in abundance. The growth has been remarkable since the nineties. The supply chain includes both small and big farmers and the product is almost wholly consumed in the urban markets. Milk is another product. But it has not increased on the same scale as poultry.

The growth of supermarkets for food and related items cannot be said to be remarkable in Bangladesh. In Dhaka city, however, the fastest growth has been, not in supermarkets, but in fast food shops and restaurants of various sizes. Twenty years back, one could count Chinese restaurants by the finger. Now one can see all types of restaurants, Chinese, Thai, Japanese, Korean and what not. The number of restaurants serving only Bangladeshi food has also increased.

In the late nineties and early 2000, a few supermarkets have sprung up in Dhaka. Foremost among them are Agora, Meenabazar and Nandan. They can be called big departmental shops or mini supermarkets. But they also provide retailing of fresh fruits, vegetables, meat and fishes. Such markets are located only in Dhanmondi and Gulshan areas. Generally, people in higher income bracket are the customers.

How does it help small farmers?

There are negative views on the above issue. First, the growth of supermarkets poses serious risks for the developing country farmers, who have traditionally supplied the local street markets. Second, the growth of supermarkets is good news for big farmers and efficient well-organized farmers. For others

For small farmers, it is difficult to get into the procurement system of supermarkets. This is because entry into the system will require investment in irrigation, greenhouses, trucks, cooling sheds and packing technologies among other things. Supermarkets will insist on grading, quality control, uninterrupted and timely delivery. There is need to assist farmers in these and other related areas so that they may get full advantage of the opportunity created by supermarkets. One of the ways to provide the linkage between small farmers and the supermarket is to establish what is known as contract growing system.

it can be troublesome. There is also the opposite view. The new trend offer opportunities as well as threats which should be faced.

Creating opportunity for small farmers

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Bangladesh Agricultural Development Corporation has been pioneer in developing the system. However, it was limited to quality seeds only. The private sector food industry in Bangladesh can also follow the contract growing system. One such industry is said to have been doing this in respect of production of pineapples, tomato and baby corn. But this is for canned products. At the other end are the vegetable exporters. Hortex Foundation during the late nineties took the initiative of establishing contract growing system for production of French beans, which are exported. But the system is yet to gain wider acceptance. Some NGOs such as BRAC does contract growing with maize farmers. Grameen Bank has also the same system. This needs to be further expanded for the benefit of small farmers.

It is not known if the very limited number of so-called supermarkets in Dhaka have adopted the system. It is unlikely that they have done so. This is because it is more convenient for them to buy from wholesalers the products that they need. It is impossible for the small farmers to bring their products in tiny lots for sale to the supermarkets. Then there is the question of grading, quality and packaging.

Difficulties of supermarkets in Dhaka

It is said that some of our supermarkets are not averse to the idea of contract farming involving small farmers. But there are difficulties. At least one supermarket, which was the pioneer, is willing to have links established to buy beef. It finds it difficult to establish such links. It is much easier for them to establish links with poultry farmers which is well organised. Beef and mutton are still the monopoly of our butchers who buy them live and sell them in the post-slaughter stage. This is organised but primitive. There is no organised slaughter houses in or around the city of Dhaka. Even then, the supermarkets in Dhaka are selling beef, mutton, fishes and indigenous poultry meat in well-packed conditions.

Facing up to the new reality of food retailing

Admittedly, Bangladesh is not where other developing countries are, in respect of the growth of supermarkets, involved in food retailing. This need not blind us to the fact that supermarkets, private

TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR TO THE EDITOR

Letters will only be considered if they carry the writer's full name, address and telephone number (if any). The identity of the writers will be protected. Letters must be limited to 300 words. All letters will be subject to editing.

Fake examinees!

Recently, 13 'fake examinees' were caught at JU. This is nothing new. In this country, it has become a regular practice. How disgraceful!

During the admission tests of DU, I witnessed that many good students were involved in this illegal act. I believe such acts should be discouraged and good students should stop sitting for examinations on behalf of others. Everyone must get the chance to prove her/his ability, only if she/he has that ability!

Md. Ariful Islam

RUET

The state of the

nation

The state of the nation can be judged from the stark reality of a three-year old baby being challenged and taken to the court on an alleged murder charge! The law minister has rightly asked for the suspension of the police official concerned (DS April 16).

The political leaders are vociferous in their attempts to portray the nation in different lights. But these enlightened leaders (who carry dead weights as shackles) miss the basics of human conduct.

Politics is a *jharoo* (broom) for cleaning up or beating. In this amphitheatre of the gladiators, the innocent masses are not allowed to participate, regardless of the

media coverage to defend the rights of the citizens. The lust for a vile life is rampant in metropolis Dhaka, enjoying a stunted growth for more than 30 years. The lunatic asylum laws need to be updated, for more catch in the net.

We are a retarded nation, and the upper class is hostage to the political *banias*, Shoodh (interest on financial capital) and commissions (and omissions) rule the day. We apparently have no faith in justice. The matter of the moment counts. Many have lost interest in politics. The empty galleries during the Indo-Pak recent cricket matches (DS, April 16) is a similar symptom represented in other countries, political devils control crores of taka through betting

(fixation).

We have to change the ineffective political tools and system. There is no point in relying on politics for a while in the near future. There is no scope for political pilgrimage, as secular politics is the rage of the day.

Khuda Hafiz has been changed into Allah Hafiz, religious semantics reinforced with political oratory. The show is free for all, but attendance is compulsory, on pain of punishment and harassment.

A Mawaz

Dhaka

Political morality

Our politics lacks moral courage, guts, and the mental acceptance

of suffering for principles. The going is not good and easy all the time. Life's chart is not a straight line; there are ups and downs all the time. Blaming the opponents does not always provide solutions or remove weaknesses, or solve internal problems.

Internal purging and reorganization are needed at regular intervals, whether in public or private lives. The public life is exposed, hence the public relation image is vitally important for maintaining the correct image. Power does not provide immunity. The lower cadres of the team have to be guided-firmly. Take it or leave it. Now is the time to leave, before it is too late.

It needs moral courage (pub-

licity) to talk on internal weaknesses within a party; when the same are known to the public. Excesses (power and influence) at the top spoil the subordinates and the field workers. Disciplinary actions are not publicised, casting a poor PR image. Facts cannot be hidden for long.

The truth will come out sooner than later (compare the US hide and seek game in Iraq). Killings and extortion have become daily events. Those who are doing it are known to the higher authorities. Stop godfathers in politics. Lock up the back doors—and no *khatir*. It is tough to be tough. Seeking popularity is a weakness. Let the actions speak—the public have that much sense.

It is so easy to point the finger at others. Inner cleanliness comes first—it is good for the liver (pun intended). Throw away the honest image. All have weaknesses, including systems losses at all levels. A political party (in or out of power) is no exception. Self-analysis is never done in public. Only the cosmetic projects are sermonised *ad infinitum*. Where is Mr Hyde hiding?

Alif Zabr

Dhaka

Sharp reaction

Our attention has been drawn to a news item published on April 13, 2004, regarding the reaction of the FICCI chief to mugging of Tk

300,000 of a foreign manufacturing company.

The incident was no doubt deplorable and a matter of concern to every citizen. The FICCI chief reacted sharply and said that foreign investors should rethink on investment in this country, contrary to the views expressed emphatically by the sponsors of EPZ. In the industrialised world, these things are not uncommon but they do not inhibit entrepreneurs from investing and doing business as long as other facilities are found conducive.

The local people representing foreign companies are expected to be more pragmatic in their approach.

Rezaul Huq

Lalmatia, Dhaka